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ABSTRACT

A written language learner must be given an environment that enables or fosters writing development. Unfortunately, the typical system of education and the learning strategies that are taught are at times the very things that deactivate, frustrate, and even pervert the writing program. In fact, some of the rules that student writers respond to are far removed from the real writing process. An example of this false response is the strategy of trying to "psyche out" the teacher, which is not the same as knowing one's audience. Deactivation of the writing process also is produced by "magical thinking," believing that children learn because teachers teach. The deactivation of the writing program will not be reformed by a return to the "basics," a solution steeped in magical thinking, but by a trust in the naturalness of writing. As natural writing contains its own topic within the rhetorical situation, school writing that begins with "select your topic" is misdirection. Writing assignments framed as new and real problems will help student writers avoid deactivation by misdirection. Another instance of writing being deactivated occurs when writing is considered in a developmental vacuum. Writing is an activity that must be nurtured over time. Teachers of writing must be guardians against deactivation of the writing program by rigid rules, by magical thinking, by misdirection, or by immaturity. (HOD)

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DEACTIVATING THE WRITING PROGRAM

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DEACTIVATING THE WRITING PROGRAM

Every age has affirmed the notion that the power of language separates us from the beasts: Adam speaking the name of each creature, Noam Chomsky positing a genetic predisposition to language. A new variation of this distinguishing feature now is being advanced in rhetorical theory by Janet Emig (1980) as she builds upon anatomist J. Z. Young's claim that humans follow programs

> that find their physical expression and codes not only in human habits and speech sounds but also in writing and other forms of recorded speech. These provide [a] level of coding, also peculiar to man, enabling some of the information for living to be recorded outside of any living creature. (1978, p. 10)

The implications of this claim are made explicit in Merron Chorny's (1980) assertion that, at this stage in our evolution, it is writing which separates us from the beasts:

> The evolution of language made us human; the discovery of writing extended the potential for the expression of our humanity. . . . Writing changed the nature of human development. (p. 1)

Is writing innate? Is it true that, at this stage in evolution, man finds his definition as homo scribens? If we are genetically predisposed, as it were "pre-wired" and "programmed" for the written language act, why then are there so many problems in developing and using writing? If we are programmed to write then the difficulties which frustrate the innate program should be attributable more to

a failure in nurture than in nature. We should look at whether or not failure to nurture offers a reasonable explanation of what happens to the pre-wired writing program. Can the writing program be deactivated?

A written language learner must be given an environment which enables or fosters writing development, just as the spoken language learner's predisposition to speech needs a speech community in which to grow. Emig (1981) characterizes the enabling environment: it must be "safe, structured, private, unobtrusive, and literate;" it must be peopled by adults who are both "fellow practioners" and "providers of possible content and experiences;" and it must provide "frequent opportunities to practice writing, many of these playful" (p. 25). Obviously, homes and school systems often provide environments that are less than enabling. Although writing is a special, wired-in capability, it must be activated, and furthermore, our system of education and the learning strategies we teach are at times the very things that deactivate, frustrate, and even pervert the writing program.

DEACTIVATION BY RIGID RULES

An example of learning strategies which frustrate pre-wired capabilities is seen in the writers whom Mike Rose (1980) describes as "blockers," those whose writing programs have been deactivated by taking heuristic strategies (rules of thumb which act as guidelines) as algorithms (strategies which act as guaranteed formulas of algebraic precision). The writers who learn that "good writers"

sit up straight, have sharp pencils, hold them firmly, and begin every sentence with a capital letter are the same writers who later cling to rules that your first paragraph must grab the reader, every essay needs three good points, every word must lead the reader back to your thesis, and you must begin your essay with a simple sentence (Rose, 1981). It is no wonder that such writers degenerate into the category of non-writers. Furthermore, these rules, as helpful as they might be for some, are not innate rules; they were learned from teachers and textbooks in schools.

In fact, some rules that student writers respond to are far removed from the real writing process. An example of this false response is the strategy of trying to "psyche out" the teacher (Rose, 1980). The teacher, although an evaluator and critical reader, is not a real audience in the sense of being organic to the rhetorical situation, just as the purpose for writing is usually not one of demonstrating to a teacher technique and ability for their own sake. "Psyching out" the teacher is not the same as the sage advice to know your audience: the former is educational game-playing, the latter is juggling a very real writing constraint that arises organically with the rhetorical situation (Flower & Hayes, 1980). The writer who relies on well-learned procedures guided by influences outside the actual writing task, in effect, reduces cognitive strain, as all good writers try to do, but pays for the short-cut by learning inflexible writing plans.

DEACTIVATION BY MAGICAL THINKING

Another deactivation of the writing process is the product of "magical thinking" (Emig, 1981).

> That teachers teach and children learn no one will deny. But to believe that children learn because teachers teach and only what teachers explicitly teach is to engage in magical thinking. . . . Most North American schools are temples to magical thinking, with the focus not only on explicit teaching but on a specific form of explicit teaching--adults presenting information before large groups of learners. (p. 21)

It comes as no surprise that magical thinking goes hand-in-hand with the pedagogy of the current traditional rhetoric (R. E. Young, 1978), viewing writing as a monomorphic, conscious, linear activity best taught atomistically, from part to whole. The deactivation of the writing program will not be reformed by a return to "the basics," a solution steeped in magical thinking, but by a leap of faith, a trust in the naturalness of writing. This leap means acknowledging developmental errors in writing are different from mistakes (Shaughnessy, 1977), providing numerous modes and models of writing, and embracing reading as the true complement to learning written language (Smith, 1981).

DEACTIVATION BY MISDIRECTION

Another instance of the pre-wired writing program being

deactivated occurs when potential writers find they lack something to write about. Their textbook tells them the first step in writing is to "select a topic" and the student-writer immediately reacts, "I can't think of anything." Has the writer been stopped by a lack of ideas or has this writer been misdirected? All natural writing contains its own topic within the rhetorical situation. School writing which begins "select your topic" (soon to be followed by "narrow your topic") is misdirection. Writing is not so much invention of a topic as it is problem solving. And in so far as it is a task to be solved, writing demands of the would-be-writer a facility with problem-solving.

It is interesting that poor problem-solvers are often poor writers. Flower and Hayes (1980) express it simply that because writers "only solve the problems they give themselves, the act of representing the problem has a dramatic impact on performance" (p. 23). Paradoxically, a poor writer may in fact be an otherwise fairly good writer solving a poorly represented problem. If writers themselves "create the problem they solve" (p. 23), good problem-solving involves defining the problem. There are a number of strategies to help writers do this: broadening the problem-statement by repeatedly asking why it is a problem, in order to get the bigger picture; sub-dividing the problem to narrow the focus; working at a more, precise, more effective restatement of the problem; and listing goals, objectives, and criteria that the solution must satisfy (Olson, 1980). Once the problem has found full representation (including audience and purpose), the next sub-process of problem-

solving involves generating diverse ideas without editing them. Many popular heuristics would be appropriate here--brainstorming, free-writing and analogy. Another device is to list the attributes of the subject of the problem, looking at the problem from the tagmemic perspectives of unit, process and field (Young, Becker & Pike, 1970). A third type of idea-generating uses a series of Synectic analogies (Gordon, 1961) to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Each of these problem-solving exercises seems to fit Emig's enabling environment, however cognitive psychologists identify two conditions in problem-solving which could yet deactivate the writing program: functional fixedness and set effects. The state of functional fixedness occurs when problems, written or not, are always represented in the same way--bricks are always used for bricks; school essays are always school essays. The cognitive state known as the Einstellung set effect occurs when past solutions become habitual mechanizations of thought--an essay that worked for one class or one teacher becomes the model for every other essay. Writing assignments framed as new and real problems will help our student-writers avoid deactivation by misdirection. After all, "none of us needs to be prodded to solve a real problem any more than we need to be urged to eat when we are hungry" (R. E. Young, 1981).

DEACTIVATION BY IMMATURITY

Another instance of writing being deactivated occurs when writing is considered in a developmental vacuum. Writing is a

function of maturity (Barritt & Kroll, 1978; Graves, 1983).

> Writing does not repeat the developmental history of speaking. Written speech is a separate linguistic function, differing from oral speech in both structure and mode of functioning. Even its minimal development requires a high level of abstraction. Our studies show that it is the abstract quality of written language that is the main stumbling block, not the underdevelopment of small muscles or any other mechanical obstacles. (Vygotsky, 1934, trans. 1962)

Even though pre-wired, writing is still an activity which must be nurtured over time. Yet, without a model "for the evolution of the normal, healthy, maturing, proficient writer," (Miller, 1980, p. 119) we are uncertain at what point a writer should exhibit a certain degree of syntactic maturity, social and conceptual maturity, and reader-based prose (Flower, 1979). Nevertheless, an environment which is not sensitive to these stages in development will be a deactivating one rather than an enabling one.

Charles Cooper (1973) feels that one of the values of sentence-combining is that a writer is given "sentences more complex than ones he would be likely to write at that point in his development" (p. 97). The theory holds that giving a writer the content of the sentences will allow him or her the freedom to concentrate on the structural aspects. However, Mina Shaughnessy (1977) found that a certain level of syntactic maturity is assumed but not necessarily present: "these operations require a memory for written words and grammatical structures that the inexperienced writer

might not have" (p. 58). This ability to manipulate syntax can be repressed in its normal development by a phenomena cognitive psychologists refer to as "downsliding."

> In order to write about an idea, the idea must be expanded downward into paragraphs, sentences, words, and letters. Sometimes writers--particularly children--become lost in the process of downward expansion and lose sight of the high-level relationships they originally wanted to express. (Collins & Gentner, 1980, p. 67)

Another stage of maturity is marked when a writer begins writing what Linda Flower (1979) calls "reader-based prose." However, before reaching this stage where the writer is able to identify with the concerns of the reader, the writer is producing "writer-based prose," similar to what Piaget calls ego-centric speech and Vygotsky calls "inner speech" (Odell, 1979). As reader-based prose develops, the writer is also developing social maturity, as measured by Kohlberg's six stages (Miller, 1980). What some teachers might take as an inability to think might be more an inability to "write persuasively from a highly relativistic rhetorical stance" (Miller, 1980, p. 124). This particular Kohlberg stage of social maturity coincides with Flower's writer-based immaturity in that both posit an inability to recognize values and readers outside of the writer's self. Sometimes the writing program can be deactivated by immaturity.

There are those who still cling to the romantic notion that the writer is a "special kind of person." Frank Smith (1981)

would debunk that myth by insisting that "there is only one difference between writers and people who do not write--<u>writers</u> <u>write</u>. This unique difference may be because writers have some rare and as yet undiscovered gene for writing, though I doubt it. . . . [And then] the alternative is that all children are born capable of learning to write at least as well as they learn to talk, but something goes wrong" (p. 794). Admitting exceptions in nature, the mentally-retarded, the physically-handicapped with damage to the eye-small motor connections, the mentally-handicapped with damage to the eye-brain connections, those for whom writing does not seem to be a sign distinguishing them from the beasts can be accounted for by a number of failures to provide the enabling environment which would have activated their pre-wired writing program. Teachers of writing must be guardians against deactivation of the writing program by rigid rules, by magical thinking, by misdirection or by immaturity.

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